
Introduction: Beagle and Ellison: A Special Issue

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Introduction

Beagle and Ellison: A Special Issue

The focus of this special issue of *JFA* is the fiction of Peter Beagle and Harlan Ellison, the guest of honor and keynote speaker, respectively, at the Ninth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in March of 1988. The reaction of many readers familiar with the work of both authors might be that it is somewhat bizarre even to invite them to the same conference, let alone tuck them between the covers of the same special issue. No two authors at first glance seem more dissimilar: Beagle the ironic lyricist of unicorns and werewolves, ghosts and goddesses; Ellison the angry visionary of the dark gods of lost innocence. Yet the two men are friends, and complement each other in ways of which each is aware. Together, they sometimes assume the roles of curmudgeon and benign spirit, and it is not always as predictable as it might seem who assumes which role. If they are not quite sides of the same coin, they are at least of the same currency, and the same might be said of their fiction.

More important, each author in his way embodies the values of the decade in which both of their reputations were solidified—the 1960s. The year 1968 saw the publication of Beagle's most famous work, *The Last Unicorn*, and Ellison's first hardcover story collection, *Love Ain't Nothing But Sex Misspelled*. This special issue, then, also may be regarded as a twentieth-anniversary celebration of key events in the career of each writer. And the apparent disparity between their styles and concerns is in many ways a reflection of the dichotomies of that decade which, twenty years later, we still will not release, and which will not release us.

It was during the 1960s that Harlan Ellison became perhaps the most famous (or at least the most visible) writer in science fiction, despite his justifiable denials that he was ever really of that genre. His first six books included a memoir of teenage gang life, a volume of stories based on those experiences, the afore-

mentioned “mainstream” collection *Love Ain’t Nothing But Sex Misspelled*, as well as works of fantasy and science fiction. All six books appeared between 1960 and 1962. In the middle years of the decade, Ellison worked extensively in Hollywood, winning Writers’ Guild awards for his work on *The Outer Limits* and *Star Trek*. Between 1965 and 1970, he received three Hugo and two Nebula awards for short fiction, plus additional awards for his television work and his landmark anthology, *Dangerous Visions*. He gained a reputation—again over his protestations—as the principal American champion of the “New Wave” in science fiction. In 1968 he began his series of essays and reviews on television collected in *The Glass Teat* and *The Other Glass Teat*, which helped establish his reputation as a critic and journalist admired by many who were barely—if at all—aware of his career in fiction.

Peter Beagle began the decade as a precocious twenty-one-year-old whose first novel, *A Fine and Private Place*, appeared in 1960 and revealed a depth of wisdom and wit belying his years. The year 1963 saw the publication of the now-classic eighteenth-century fable, “Come, Lady Death,” and in the following year Beagle undertook an unlikely motor-scooter odyssey across America which he chronicled in *I See By My Outfit* (1965)—as vivid and revealing a chronicle of its time as the works of Jack Kerouac and Robert Pirsig are for theirs. In 1968, of course, came *The Last Unicorn*, a quest fantasy which at the same time parodies all quest fantasies—liberally sprinkled with ironies and incongruities which temper the book’s innocent idealism without degrading it, and marked by a kind of self-referentiality that connects it to the metafictional experiments of mainstream sixties literature. It is not surprising that the novel became a favorite both of the love-and-peace generation and of the later generation of post-structuralists and *Monty Python* devotees.

To suggest that each writer embodies some aspect of the sixties is not to suggest that either’s work is in any way dated. The turbulence of that decade simply brought to the surface many of the enduring concerns that also happen to characterize the work of Beagle and Ellison. The idea that magic is somehow a function of love, which pervades much of Beagle’s work, is also an idea which could permit a gathering of enthusiastic pilgrims

to try to levitate the Pentagon in 1967. The power of gentleness and desire which works such marvelous transformations in Beagle's stories worked less well when it came to inserting flowers in the guns of National Guard troopers, but the principle was the same. And the weight of the evils and injustices which both darkened and motivated the utopianism of the sixties is not tempered in his works, but made a real part of the fabric of his seemingly innocent worlds. The sixties did not invent these concerns, and one sees them reflected also in the works of some of Beagle's own favorite writers—James Stephens, Robert Nathan, James Thurber, and, of course, J. R. R. Tolkien.

Nor did the sixties invent the rhetoric of protest and resistance with which Harlan Ellison has been so closely associated. His antecedents range from Henry David Thoreau to Mark Twain to don marquis, and even his prolific pre-1960s magazine fiction stressed the themes of accepting responsibility and undertaking the most ethical actions that conditions permit. "Which Side Are You On?", one of the anthems of the sixties folk revival, could almost have been his theme. Not only did he address directly in his fiction the immediate issues of racism, abortion, Vietnam, technology, poverty, indifference, and urban violence, he also found ways of abstracting from these issues the most terrifying images and of challenging us to recognize them within ourselves and to confront them. Ellison's highly visible anger won him many converts among the peace marchers and protesters, but the courage and the abiding concern with ethics which underlay this anger have also won him the increasing respect of a wide variety of readers and fellow writers.

Most of the essays in this special issue were presented, in somewhat different form, as papers at the same Fort Lauderdale conference at which Beagle and Ellison were guests. The session on Beagle, which featured the papers by Don Riggs and Richard West, was chaired by Kenneth Zahorski, whose recent study of Beagle was published by Starmont House. The paper by Ellen R. Weil was presented in a session chaired by Doretta Cornell and also featuring Joseph Patrouch (whose essay here is different from the one he presented at the conference). Thomas Dunn chaired the session in which George Aichele's paper was presented, and Richard Erlich the session at which Peter Malekin read his essay. Joel Feimer's essay has not appeared in any form

before, nor has Harlan Ellison's "The Wind Took Your Answer Away," a moving personal essay which will be the introduction to his forthcoming volume of short stories, *Angry Candy* (Houghton Mifflin).

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